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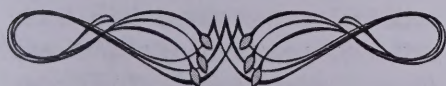
OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

January 2010

## COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The January luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, January 21, 2010, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker will be Louis Kyriakoudes, Professor of History at the University of Southern Mississippi, who will speak on the USM Oral History Project. *Reservations are required* and may be made by calling 467-4090. Please call *by noon on Wednesday, January 20*, to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-five people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare.



## MEMBERSHIP FEES

It's time to send in your membership dues for 2010. If you are unsure about whether your fees are due, check the date on your address label. This date is your expiration date. Prices are fifteen dollars (\$15) for an individual and twenty-five (\$25) for a household.



Old bricks found in the NASA buffer zone

## Bricks in Early Hancock County

By

Russell B. Guerin

In the summer of 2009, a very puzzling discovery was made in NASA's buffer zone by an archaeologist working with Dr. Marco Giardino, NASA Historic Preservation Officer. It consisted of a cache of bricks stacked several deep, buried by years of earth deposits, and measuring many square feet in area. The exact location can

not be disclosed in order to prevent unauthorized searches on federal land.

At first blush, the usual and obvious interpretation would be that this had at one time been the foundation of a home, or perhaps a large brick patio. Because of the depth of the bricks, however, this conclusion does not stand the test of reason.

Another possibility lies in the description of the town of Napoleon by Etienne Maxon in his book, *The Progress of the Races*. Maxon, who had taught school in the county and was postmaster in Pearlinton during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, states that the town once had a brickyard, but it failed because the



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**HISTORIAN**

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Eddie Coleman, Editor  
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Marianne Pluim, Webmaster**LOBRANO HOUSE  
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"TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION."

clay was not good. This could be a logical reason why many bricks were simply stacked and left behind, unsalable.

Still, the site presents a mystery to the professional archaeologists, and further investigation may find another reason for such a site.

Sometimes, answers can be found outside of our own local history. Bearing in mind that we have little of our early history, partly because of a fire which destroyed the Gainesville courthouse in 1853, one may find an answer to the riddle in documents of our neighboring state.

In the archives of Louisiana one may find an important mention of a Hancock County pursuit dating from 1820 and earlier. A report made to the federal government states, "By the middle of June, 1820, the work was progressing well. Bennett and Morte's brick yard on the Pearl River has some 700,000 bricks ready for shipment to the site." The site was to become Fort Pike, located on the Rigolets, which eventually became very important to the maritime industry of our county.

Shortly before the above report was made, another announced a contract for timber. It reads, in part, "...fifty thousand feet three inch plank, Two hundred and thirty Round logs, and fourteen Hundred hewed [logs], for the foundation of the Work at Petite Coquille, to be delivered in November & December."

The lumber contractor has not been identified. Nonetheless, a good assumption is that much of that timber would have come from nearby Hancock County mills.

It may be surprising to find that brickmaking was an early enterprise in Hancock County. Perhaps it was a temporary industry, as no early residents other than James

Bennett and Peter Morte are known to have engaged in brickmaking. While the census reports of 1820-1840 do not list occupations, the census of 1850 does, but only two persons in the entire report identified themselves as brickmakers. These were Asa Russ, a prominent land dealer and planter, and a younger man, Thomas Harper, living at the Russ address. Later, in 1872, there was a statement by the Rev. Taylor Fryerson, who had come to Gainesville, that he had worked in the Poitevent brickyard and sawmill.

What we have found about Bennett and Morte is that they were listed in the 1820 Hancock County census. Instead of being itemized as individuals, the listing is joint, i.e., "Bennett & Morte," seeming to indicate a firm name. In other documents studied, one or both did, at some points, reside in the county and in New Orleans.

The line item of the census which usually describes a single household shows some 129 persons at this location. Besides a few male children, there were 84 free white males and 37 "foreigners not naturalized." None were under the categories for slaves and free coloreds.

The first clue to this large undertaking was found in a book called *The Encyclopedia of Forts, Posts, Named Camps....* This document has a history of Fort Pike, showing that bricks for the construction of the fort were to come from two places in Louisiana and one in Mississippi, that being Pearlinton. About four hundred men were employed in making the bricks, and thirty to forty vessels were used in shipping them.

Files at Fort Pike indicate that by July 1821, a total of 3,456,400 bricks had been delivered and used at the site. It has not been determined how many came from



Hancock County. It is known that some contracts for the making of bricks were not fulfilled, the cause having been the federal government's failure to pay as scheduled. Naturally, this lack of payment is a consideration for why a large number may have been abandoned many years ago.

In the current structure of Fort Pike, the initials "US" are evident in some of the floor bricks with the assumption that they are part of the original plan. This one detail might prove relevant in future research.

### Who were Bennett and Morte?

James Bennett and Peter Morte were not native to Hancock County. In fact, their domicile was Washington, DC, where they had mortgaged their homes in order to undertake the contract with the government. That contract appears to have been more than a brick agreement and, in fact, was an agreement with the Corps of Engineers for Bennett and Morte to build Fort Pike and, in addition, perhaps the one which became Fort Macomb.

The contract was not fulfilled. While it is recorded that by June 1820 work was progressing, it was suspended in August and September, a time known as "the sickly season." During that period, laborers were not available in large numbers, probably for fear of yellow fever.

Much had been accomplished by the following year, but on September 16, 1821, a hurricane severely damaged what had been built. A historic structure report of the state of Louisiana reports that the losses included thousands of feet of plank and logs, as well as "all the buildings erected for the

care and housing of the workmen and six months supplies just laid in for the upcoming building season."

That document continues, "In short, Bennett and Morte lost everything."

From that time forward, the contractors were named in numerous suits by employees. Most were small claims for unpaid wages, bearing dates of 1820-21. The earliest was dated April 1820, indicating that the troubles for Bennett and Morte predated the hurricane. Of those that were settled, payment was made by the bondsman Nathaniel Cox for the contractors.

These documents, almost two hundred years old, are housed in the New Orleans Public Library. Some mentions of familiar names of people in Hancock County are in evidence. These include well-known family names such as Lott, Ripley, Sheriff, Favre, and Livingston. One "statement of debt" for those at Pearl River includes the following: Amos Lott - \$101; John Barnes - \$242; W. Bracy - \$27; F. B. Lenoir - \$99.

Also mentioned were debts of \$500, perhaps as attorney fees, due E.M. Ripley and someone named Livingston. [*Ripley was probably Gen. Ripley, who owned property in Hancock County; Livingston may have been Edward Livingston, a lawyer in New Orleans who had been granted thousands of acres in the Pass Christian area and the brother of the famous Robert Livingston, U. S. Minister to France from 1801-1804, who had negotiated the Louisiana Purchase.*] An interesting note in the file is that Livingston was listed as "unknown to Morte."

Pearlington seems to have been the location in Hancock County most cited in documents, further showing that it was a well

developed town in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

One suit against Bennett and Morte is of particular interest. In this case, the plaintiff was Peter Murphy. Although no Murphys are listed in the census of 1820, it is known that the Murphys became a prominent family in the Napoleon area.

Despite all their troubles, the contractors may have recovered. The final denouement is not in evidence, but it seems that they filed suit against the government in May 1821; Bennett and Morte were the petitioners with their "creditors" as the defendants. This suit asked for a total award of \$70,000 with a debt schedule listing "all negroes, tools, building materials."

The names Bennett and Morte do not recur in later census reports. There is evidence that one of them died shortly after their failure at Fort Pike. It may be assumed that the other eventually returned home to Washington after the failure. The outcome of their petition against the government has not been discovered.

The story of the bricks of Fort Pike, of Bennett and Morte, and of the many resultant suits, while interesting, does not solve the puzzle of the cache of bricks on NASA property. But the job of digging is not an unusual method of investigation for an archaeologist, and so, after all the above facts were laid out without conclusion, more shoveling was in order.

This time, it was done with the "search" function on Giardino's computer. What was unearthed was a mention in the journal of Benjamin Wailes, the state geologist who came through Hancock County in 1852. His entry for Sunday, August 15 of that year, includes the following:

"Walked with Dr. Montgomery





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to the river bluff, the site of the village of Napoleon....several families settled there; some buildings were erected, and a distillery of spirits of turpentine and camphor were established. This has, however, been abandoned and dismantled; the mill removed to Florida, and most of the families removed and the buildings fast going to decay, and are unoccupied. There are the traces of extensive brick yards, the brick for the

construction of Port [sic] Pike, many years since, having been made here...."

So there it is, allowing for the misnomer of the fort, as close as anything we may hope to find to explain the enigma of the bricks in the buffer zone. Is it conclusive? No, but if one day we find that some of them have the letters "US," we may be satisfied.



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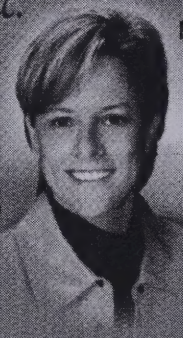
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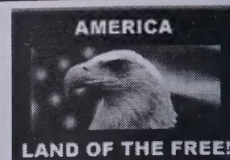




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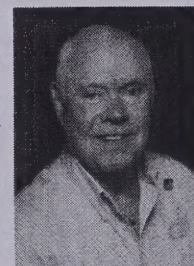
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